

Roll Call, July 3, 2006

In the 1970s, as a young deputy sheriff in King County, Wash., Rep. Dave Reichert (R) had his throat slashed while trying to break up a domestic dispute.

Reichert's attacker spent time in a mental institution, then was released. Later, Sheriff Reichert made an effort to find out what happened to the man. He found he was teaching school in Colorado.

Reichert recounted the tale to fellow Republicans last month as part of an effort to get them to back a bill enabling school districts to tap into national criminal databases before they hire employees.

It turned out that the school district that hired Reichert's attacker had checked Colorado databases but had no idea about his criminal record in the Evergreen State.

The bill Reichert was boosting, the School Safely Acquiring Faculty Excellence Act, passed the House almost unanimously in June — the first legislative success for the GOP's "Suburban Agenda," a set of bills designed to appeal to the majority of American voters who live in the suburbs.

The agenda is the brainchild of Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), one of Congress' most effective moderates, who has sold it to a growing group of conservatives and the House GOP leadership.

Kirk, who represents North-suburban Chicago, told me, "I noticed that the Republican Party was led by mostly Southern and rural Members, starting with [Speaker] Denny Hastert (R-Ill.) from the cornfields of Illinois. And the Democratic Party is led by Members representing the central urban cores. [House Minority Leader] Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) is from central San Francisco. The American people live in between.

“Washington may think this is small-bore. It’s not the war on terror. But this is an agenda that people care about in their everyday lives — their kids’ safety, health care, their ability to send their kids to college.”

Besides the school safety measure, the agenda includes a national “401Kids” savings account for college, a screen to block predators from contacting children at online chat rooms and a bill setting standards for computerizing health records.

Kirk got the idea for a suburban agenda in early 2004, made a presentation on it at the party’s national convention in New York, formed a House GOP caucus around it and commissioned pollster John McLaughlin to test potential policy items.

From an original core of 22 Members, the suburban caucus has grown to 67. McLaughlin’s polling indicates that 70 percent to 80 percent of voters say they’d be more likely to support a Republican candidate knowing that he or she favors items in the agenda.

“I suspect that in the 36 districts where this election will be decided, the suburban agenda is going to be talked about a lot,” House Majority Whip Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) told me.

Even some Democrats have signed on to specific bills, not entirely to their leadership’s liking. All the bills are lead-sponsored by Republicans on the Democrats’ 2006 target list, and top Democrats have tried to get their Members to avoid co-sponsoring them.

The school safety bill, for example, was lead-sponsored by Rep. Jon Porter (R-Nev.), who represents suburban Las Vegas. In the Senate, Kirk told me, the bill is being bottled up by Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.), who’s hoping to see Porter defeated.

Another measure that originally attracted bipartisan support is the Health IT Promotion Act, sponsored by Rep. Nancy Johnson (R-Conn.), which would set standards for computerizing health records, widely deemed necessary for improving health quality and cost-saving.

However, the two Democrats on the bill, Reps. Sheila Jackson Lee (Texas) and Anna Eshoo (Calif.), abruptly dropped off last week as Johnson's bill was slated for House floor action later this month.

Porter's bill retains the support of Rep. Mark Udall (D-Colo.). And Rep. Melissa Bean (D-Ill.) is co-sponsoring the Deleting Online Predators Act sponsored by Rep. Michael Fitzpatrick (R-Pa.). He also is co-sponsoring her online predator bill.

Reichert, who gained fame for capturing Washington's "Green River killer," is sponsor of the anti-gang bill. Targeted Rep. Clay Shaw (R-Fla.) is sponsoring the "401Kids" bill, and Rep. Jim Gerlach (R-Pa.) is promoting a measure to help farmers preserve open spaces.

Kirk is already working on a "second wave" of suburban bills, including one sponsored by Rep. Deborah Pryce (R-Ohio) that would allow workers who lose their jobs to keep their health insurance for life, not just 18 months, as provided under current COBRA law.

Another bill would give teachers permission to search students for dangerous weapons without fear of litigation.

At one time, I thought that Kirk's suburban agenda was small-bore and symbolic, something like former President Bill Clinton's advocacy of school uniforms. It won't cure global warming or capture Osama bin Laden, but he's convinced me it's bigger than that. And so has Democratic hostility.